



March 2024

INVESTMENTS IN STUDENT RECOVERY

5 Facts about Rural School Districts' Pandemic Relief Spending on Afterschool and Summer Programs

In rural Washington State, American Rescue Plan (ARP) funds allowed the Deer Park School District to open a new afterschool program for elementary schoolers, providing homework help, STEM learning opportunities, and time to work in teams and build leadership skills. In West Virginia, ARP funds supported Morgan County Schools' afterschool and summer programming, providing support such as STEM and wellness activities, transportation, and food.

In total, ARP provided \$122 billion in federal pandemic relief for schools and their efforts to address students' learning recovery. A lifeline for schools, this funding has allowed for critical investments, including the expansion of afterschool and summer learning opportunities.¹ **Although most rural school districts reported dedicating funds toward afterschool and summer programs, the investments represented only a small portion of available funds. Overwhelmingly, the funded programs focused on academics alone and were not comprehensive—meaning enrichment was not blended in with academics.**

The potential for ARP investments in afterschool programs is especially meaningful in rural communities, as the need for afterschool resources is high:^{2,3}

- ✓ For every 1 rural child in an afterschool program, 4 more are waiting to get in
- ✓ 3 in 4 rural afterschool program providers (74%) are concerned that there are children in their community who need afterschool programming but cannot access it
- ✓ 77% of rural afterschool program providers report worries about their program's long-term funding and future

Afterschool and summer programs provide rural students with opportunities they may not otherwise have, offering support for their well-being and academic growth. From help with schoolwork and engaging, hands-on learning activities, to building life skills and connecting with friends and mentors, programs help youth realize their full potential. Recognizing the benefits of programs, rural parent demand for programs has risen more than 40% since 2014.

Given the opportunity ARP Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ARP ESSER) funds presented, how have rural districts invested in afterschool and summer programming for students?

Below are five key findings about rural school districts’ ARP ESSER spending based on a review of 1,993 rural school district plans.^{*,4}

1. Most rural school districts included afterschool or summer programming in their ARP ESSER plans, but less frequently than school districts in cities and the suburbs.

Of the nearly 2,000 rural school district ARP ESSER plans reviewed, most mention summer (72%) or afterschool programming (60%). However, rural districts are much less likely to include afterschool programming in their ARP ESSER plans than school districts in cities (see Figure 1).

While 60% of rural school district plans included afterschool programming, this is 10 percentage points lower than city school districts (70%). Comparing rural and suburban district plan mentions of afterschool programming, the difference is smaller, but rural districts again are less likely to include afterschool activities in ARP ESSER plans (60% vs. 64%). Similarly, rural school districts are slightly less likely to mention summer programming than districts in cities (72% vs. 75%) and the suburbs (72% vs. 75%).

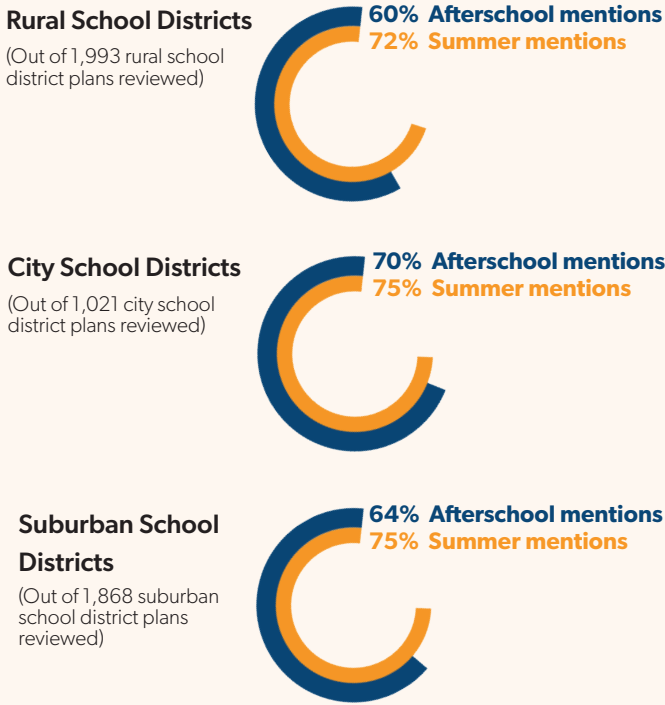
The smaller number of rural school districts that mention afterschool and summer programming in their ARP ESSER plans is largely driven by rural districts in the Midwest. Less than half of Midwest rural school districts (48%) mentioned afterschool activities in their ARP ESSER plans, compared to 62% of rural districts in the West, 63% in the South, and 67% in the Northeast. Looking at summer programming, 62% of Midwest rural school districts included summer programming in their plans, compared to 72% of rural districts in the Northeast, 73% in the West, and 78% in the South.

2. Rural school districts allocated at least \$539 million dollars, or 7% of their ARP ESSER funds, toward afterschool and summer programming.

Of the 1,524 rural school district plans that included budget numbers for their afterschool and summer investments, a total of \$539 million was allocated for afterschool and summer programming, or 7% of these districts’ ARP ESSER funds. This represents a small portion of the funds that districts were mandated to spend on learning recovery efforts. The minimum amount of funding mandated for learning recovery was 20% of a district’s ARP ESSER funds. Across this subset of 1,524 rural district plans, at least \$1.5 billion was to be spent on learning recovery efforts.

Figure 1. Comparing school districts by community type, rural districts are the least likely to set aside ARP ESSER funds for summer or afterschool programming

Percentage of district plans, by community type, that mention spending ARP ESSER funds on summer or afterschool programming



^{*} This fact sheet follows up on the report, “Investments in Student Recovery: A Review of School Districts’ Use of American Rescue Plan Funding to Support Afterschool and Summer Opportunities,” which analyzes more than 6,300 school district ARP plans.

Interestingly, the percentage of rural district spending toward afterschool and summer programming is on par with the national average, where nationally, school districts spent 8%, or at least \$5.4 billion of districts’ ARP ESSER funds, on afterschool and summer programs. Rural district plans for afterschool and summer activities included items such as salaries and benefits for school day teachers to staff programs, instructional materials, activity supplies, and transportation for students to get home from programs.

3. Rural school districts were more likely to dedicate funds to academic-only programming than comprehensive afterschool or summer programming that offered both academics and enrichment.

Among rural school district plans that included afterschool, a majority (55%) focused on academic-only programming, compared to just 14% that invested in afterschool programming offering both academics and enrichment. Similarly, summer program investments were more likely to focus on academics only. Among rural school district plans that mentioned summer, approximately half (51%) focused on academics alone, compared to one-quarter of districts (24%) whose summer programming included academics and enrichment (see Figure 2).

Examining regional differences, rural districts in the South were most likely to say that their afterschool ARP ESSER funds were going toward academic-only programming (59%), while rural districts in the West and Northeast were more likely than rural districts overall to invest in comprehensive programming (see Figure 3). For summer program allocations, rural districts in the West and Midwest were much more likely than rural districts overall to invest in academic programming, while Northeast rural districts were most likely to dedicate summer ARP ESSER funds to academic and enrichment programming.

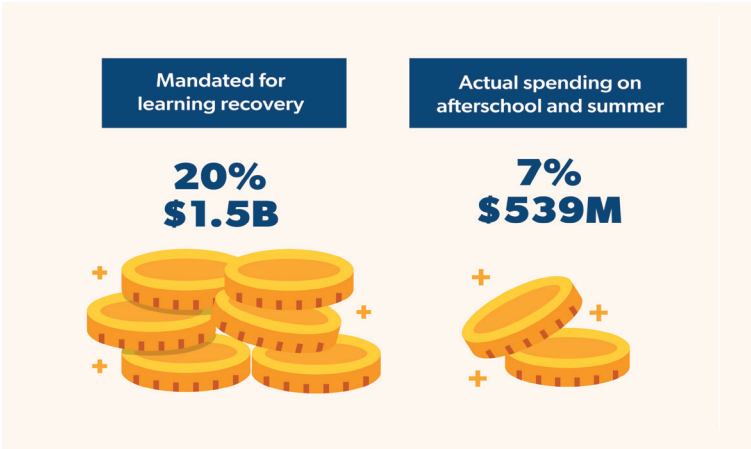


Figure 2. Rural districts were the most likely to dedicate their ARP ESSER funds for afterschool and summer toward academic supports and the least likely to fund comprehensive programming

Percentage of district plans, by community type, that mention spending ARP ESSER funds on summer or afterschool programming

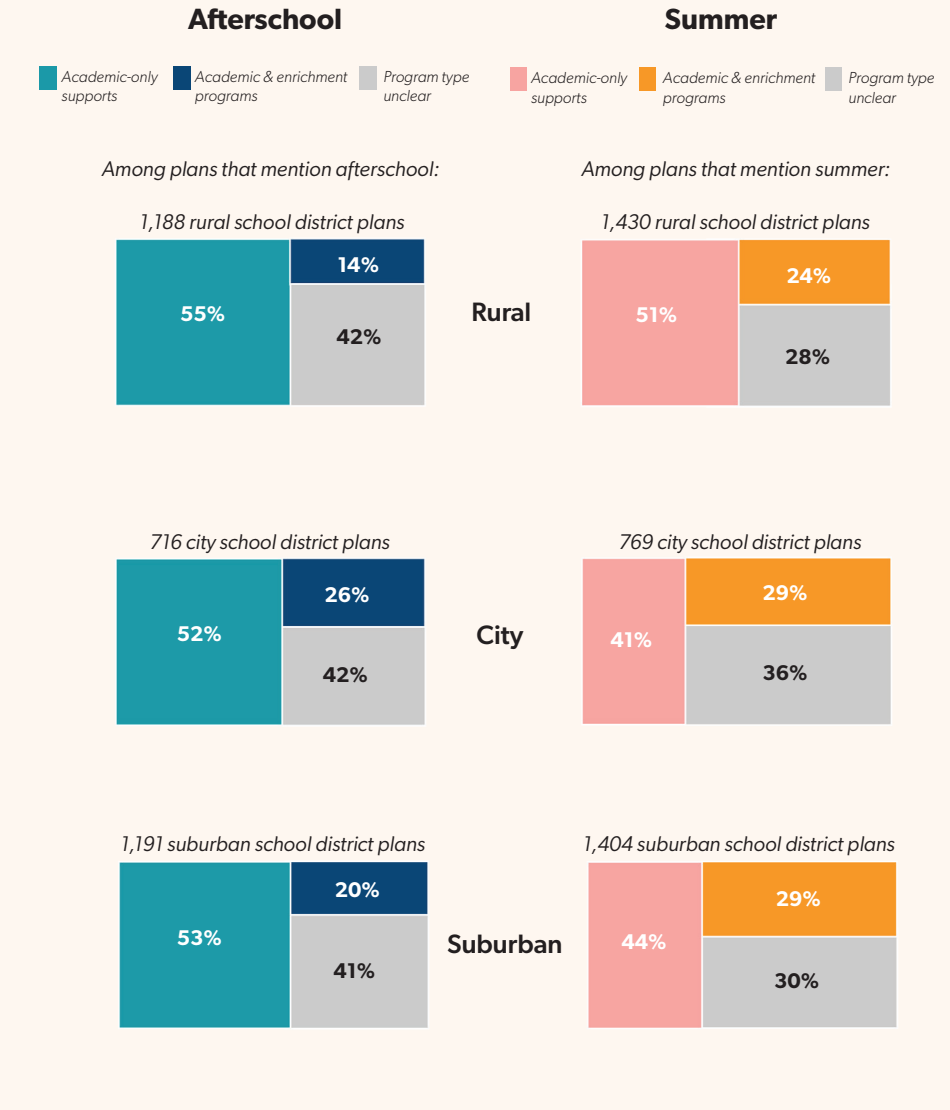


Figure 3. Rural school districts’ priorities for their afterschool and summer activities differ depending on their locale
Percentage of rural district plans, by region, that mention spending ARP ESSER funds on afterschool or summer programming

Rural school districts located in the:	Afterschool		Summer	
	Academics Only	Academics + Enrichment	Academics Only	Academics + Enrichment
Midwest	51%	12%	58%	22%
Northwest	48%	19%	44%	30%
South	59%	10%	47%	24%
West	54%	24%	61%	22%

4. Compared to other community types, rural districts were least likely to dedicate funds toward comprehensive afterschool and summer programs.

While a minority of school districts, regardless of community type, dedicated ARP ESSER funds toward out-of-school time programming that included both academics and enrichment, rural school districts were the least likely to designate funds toward the combination of these activities (see Figure 2). Fourteen percent of rural school district plans that dedicated funds toward afterschool programming included both academic and enrichment activities, compared to 26% of city and 20% of suburban districts. Approximately 1 in 4 rural districts (24%) that invested in summer programs supported both academic and enrichment components, compared to nearly 3 in 10 city and suburban districts (29%, all).

5. Rural school districts were most likely to include transportation-related costs in their ARP ESSER spending for afterschool or summer programming.

Transportation is a significant barrier to afterschool program participation for families living in rural communities. A 2022 survey of rural parents found that among those without a child in an afterschool program, more than 4 in 10 said that an important reason they did not enroll their child was due to the lack of a safe way to and from the afterschool program (47%) or that program locations in their community were inconvenient (44%).⁵ Of the rural school districts that allocated ARP ESSER funding toward afterschool or summer-related programming, approximately 1 in 4 (26%) set aside funds for transportation costs, including bus driver salaries and benefits, fuel or mileage reimbursement, or the purchase of a vehicle, such as a bus, shuttle, or van. A smaller percentage of districts located in cities (21%) and those in the suburbs (21%) dedicated at least a portion of their afterschool or summer programming budget toward transportation.



A Window of Opportunity Remains

Youth in rural communities have much to gain from afterschool and summer programs. From hands-on learning opportunities to solving real-world problems and exploring careers, afterschool and summer programs expose children to new experiences that help them realize their full potential, and build important life skills such as teamwork, communication, and critical thinking.

ARP ESSER funds can still be used by rural school districts to support afterschool and summer opportunities. In fact, an estimated 45% of rural districts' ARP ESSER funds are still available (as of January 2024), totaling more than \$4.7 billion that could be invested in comprehensive afterschool and summer programs that support students' academic growth and well-being. These investments would make progress toward the goal of ensuring that all rural students who want to take part in programs are able to.⁶

Visit [EngageEveryStudent.org](https://engageeverystudent.org), an initiative of the U.S. Department of Education, to learn more about accessing ARP funds for afterschool and summer.



AFTERSCHOOL INSIGHT

Expanding Opportunity for Rural Students

In rural Washington State, the Deer Park School District invested \$250,000 of ARP ESSER funds to establish an afterschool program for students in grades K-5. Students received extra homework help; engaged in STEM learning opportunities; put on a talent show; explored financial literacy concepts, such as spending and budgeting; and took part in physical activity, all while building teamwork and leadership skills. On the other side of the U.S., Greater Amsterdam School District in New York used ARP ESSER funds to cover transportation to afterschool programs, which is a significant challenge in rural communities, and to support new activities, such as Lego Robotics and Makerspaces, a hiking club, arts activities, and a band club.



Endnotes

¹ AASA. (2023). School District Spending of American Rescue Plan Funding: Part IV. Retrieved from: https://www.aasa.org/docs/default-source/advocacy/arp-survey-part-iv.pdf?sfvrsn=b69a67e1_3/ARP-Survey-Part-IV

² Afterschool Alliance. (2021). Spiking Demand, Growing Barriers: The Trends Shaping Afterschool and Summer Learning in Rural Communities. Retrieved from: <https://afterschoolalliance.org/documents/AA3PM/AA3PM-Rural-Report-2021.pdf>

³ Afterschool Alliance. Online survey of afterschool and summer program providers, conducted October 31-December 5, 2023.

⁴ School districts classified as rural are based on National Center for Education Statistics' (NCES) designation. NCES defines rural territories as those located outside of urban areas and have a population less than 2,500.

⁵ Afterschool Alliance. National online survey of 1,498 parents of school-aged children, conducted May 12-June 28, 2022, 322 of which reported that they lived in a rural community.

⁶ Afterschool Alliance calculation based on school district data spending totals received from Burbio on January 10, 2024.